



PROJECT MUSE®

Melancholy, Memories, and Six Nostalgias: Postquake Christchurch and the Problems of Recalling the Past

Jacky Bowring

Change Over Time, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 82-101 (Article)

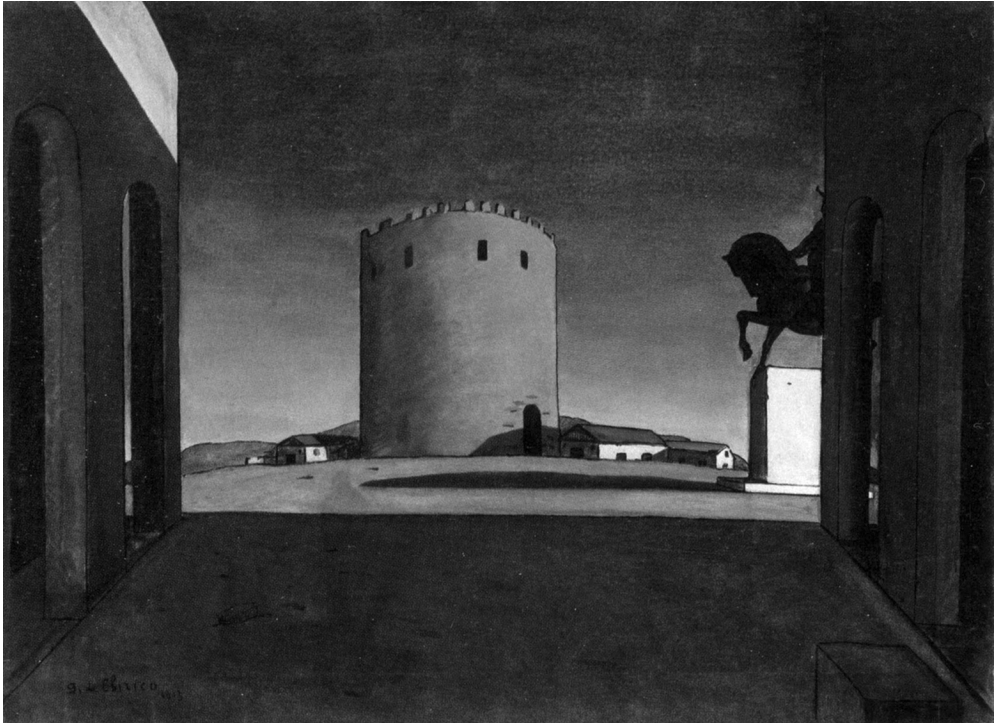
Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: 10.1353/cot.2013.0006



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cot/summary/v003/3.1.bowring.html>



MELANCHOLY, MEMORIES, AND SIX NOSTALGIAS

Postquake Christchurch and the Problems of Recalling the Past

JACKY BOWRING

Lincoln University

Figure 1. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Red Tower*, 1913. (Public Domain)

The city of Christchurch, New Zealand, was until very recently a “Junior England”—a small city that still bore the strong imprint of nineteenth-century British colonization, alongside a growing interest in the underlying biophysical setting and the indigenous pre-European landscape. All of this has changed as the city has been subjected to a devastating series of earthquakes, beginning in September 2010, and still continuing, with over 12,000 aftershocks recorded. One of these aftershocks, on February 22, 2011, was very close to the city center and very shallow with disastrous consequences, including a death toll of 185. Many buildings collapsed, and many more need to be demolished for safety purposes, meaning that over 80 percent of the central city will have gone. Tied up with this is the city’s precious heritage—its buildings and parks, rivers, and trees. The threats to heritage throw debates over economics and emotion into sharp relief. A number of nostalgic positions emerge from the dust and rubble, and in one form is a reverse-amnesia—an insistence of the past in the present. Individuals can respond to nostalgia in very different ways, at one extreme become mired in it and unable to move on, and at the other, dismissive of nostalgia as a luxury in the face of more pressing crises. The range of positions on nostalgia represent the complexity of heritage debates, attachment, and identity—and the ways in which disasters amplify the ongoing discourse on approaches to conservation and the value of historic landscapes.

Christchurch, New Zealand’s Melancholy

Christchurch’s inner city presently bears an uncanny resemblance to a De Chirico painting. The abandoned streets, isolated structures and air of a time past bring to mind images such as *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), *The Nostalgia of the Infinite* (1914), and *The Red Tower* (1913) (Fig. 1). The inner city is not accessible to the public, and must be viewed from a distance, the detached gaze of an outsider. Looking through the chain-link fences, complete with sentry boxes and army guards, there is a strange familiarity, but it is becoming more strange and less familiar by the day. Huge swathes of the built environment have been razed, leaving any remaining structures standing like surreal stage sets (Fig. 2).

Melancholy subsumes the city. Loss, longing, and profound feelings of a deeply wounded collective psyche pervade daily life. At times it seems there is a communal inertia, an inability to get on and deal with it. Everywhere there are triggers for melancholic reflection. Ruins, fragments, and voids have become the stuff of daily life.

There is beauty in melancholy, but it takes time. Post-earthquake Christchurch is still raw and awe-filled. It is a melancholy sublime rather than a beautiful melancholy that is the reigning aesthetic, and it is daunting. The sublime’s eluding of comprehensibility, the exceeding of the realms of comfort, and the sense of limitlessness, all impart a feeling of



Figure 2. A Postquake Christchurch—all the buildings in this photograph have been, or will be, demolished (including the twenty-six-story Hotel Grand Chancellor in the background). (Jacky Bowring)

ongoing violence for the city. The fragments and the razed sites create a melancholic unease, echoing Karsten Harries's description of ruins as evoking a sensation of things "sliding out into space," where the hint of the familiar, which is tethered to melancholy, is lost, and there is "not so much a domestication as a liberation of space which means also of time. The terror, or rather the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of time, is awakened rather than banished."¹

The melancholy ruins are a problem in the context of historic preservation, in that a ruin is a transitory state. Recent ruins are perplexing in this regard, as they demand decisions, they necessitate a position to be taken. Ruins are fundamentally melancholy, yet only in their aged state can they be beautiful. As fragmentary remains, ruins have "age value," registering the impacts of devastation and decay, and imbuing the landscape with history, memory.² Picturesque theorists illuminated a number of reasons for ruins' aesthetic appeal, ranging from the softening that came with decay through to romantic associations triggered by the signs of time and history. William Gilpin admired a ruined tree for the way it brought "grand ideas to the landscape," manifesting the effects of storms, lightning or "other great events."³ Time affords the distance that is necessary in the appreciation of ruins. Jean Starobinski observed that for a ruin to be beautiful, "the act of destruction must be remote enough for its precise circumstances to have been forgotten" and then "it can then be imputed to an anonymous power, to a featureless transcendent



Figure 3. The nineteenth-century Gothic Revival architecture of the Arts Centre (originally the University of Canterbury). (Anke Lüdtkke)

force—History, Destiny.”⁴ This distancing is “ruin time,” a temporal interlude in which a damaged structure loses its raw and painful appearance, which as Florence Hetzler observed “may be started by human or natural causes but the maturation process must be done by nature in ruin time.”⁵ Ruin time is centuries according to Rose Macaulay, who declared that, “[n]othing can have been more melancholy than the first shattered aspects of the destroyed abbeys before they took on the long patience and endurance of time; they were murdered bodies, their wounds gaped and bled.”⁶ These ruins, like those of bombed cities, needed “the long patience and endurance of time” before they “mellowed into ruin.” For a landscape devastated by a natural disaster in which many lives were lost, there is a need for emotional distance before an aesthetic appreciation can be ethical.

The recent ruins in the city’s landscape test our affection for the landscape. Without the distance of ruin time the city’s broken buildings are not beautiful. They are raw, painful scars; open wounds. But the beauty of sadness is latent in this landscape, and with time’s passage the melancholy of ruins will become appreciated as part of a rebuilt city. Underpinning all of this is the particular species of melancholy called nostalgia, itself a complicated concept. Before turning to Christchurch’s nostalgias, attention is first focused on the context for this melancholy situation, a reflection on the past and the events that led to the pressing dilemmas of conservation, preservation, and demolition that face the city.

Remembering Christchurch

It was Junior England all the way to Christchurch—in fact, just a garden. And Christchurch is an English town, with an English-park annex, and a winding English brook just like the Avon . . . It is a settled old community, with all the serenities, the graces, the conveniences, and the comforts of the ideal home-life. If it had an established Church and social inequality it would be England over again with hardly a lack.⁷

Mark Twain's account of Christchurch at the end of the nineteenth century reads like a reverie. A place made in the image of elsewhere, an imagined place, a kind of utopia. It sounds like, to paraphrase Lowenthal, a foreign country.⁸ But this Christchurch was, until very recently, not so far from reality. The idea of the city as an epitome of Englishness, gently overlaying the indigenous landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand, was core to its identity. It was seen as a benign city, quiet and conservative. The "English" character was largely founded upon the heritage architecture of the city, with substantial complexes of Gothic Revival architecture and precincts of double-skin brick buildings evocative of a Victorian townscape (Fig. 3). The green squares, botanic gardens and central park, all further contributed to the sense of a pleasant garden city.

Formed on the generic colonial grid pattern broken only by the meandering Avon River, Christchurch's sense of order and tranquility belied what lay beneath. It was relatively well known that prior to the establishment of the city in the mid-nineteenth century the area had been swampy, rich in birds and fish, supporting pockets of Maori settlement. In recent years there were ongoing discussions about the importance of the remaining waterways to the city, and energetic debates about strategies for planting that were motivated by ideology as much as ecology. But all of this was in the context of the presumption of understanding of the city's setting; it was in the context of having a choice about how the city might be transformed.

The earthquakes of 2010, 2011, and 2012 shattered the illusion of tranquility, shaking the city to its core. The transformation was sudden and devastating. No longer a benign city, the underlying landscape reasserted itself tragically, with the seismic activity impacting in multiple ways, amplifying the force of the shaking alone. It was immediately evident that the city's underlying conditions were far from understood. The first quake came at 4:35 AM on September 4th, a magnitude 7.1 tremor that tore dramatic fissures across the neat agricultural landscape of the Canterbury Plains that surround the city. The rupture of the blind fault came from out of the blue, and produced "the highest ratio of movement for its length of any recorded quake."⁹ Historic brick homesteads on farms across the plains were severely damaged. Silos toppled. Roads and hedges were dramatically pulled in opposite directions. In the city, the first instance of the now all too familiar phenomenon of liquefaction occurred. With shaking, the swampy lands liquefy to produce "sand volcanoes," erupting silt into streets, parks, and even into the interiors of people's homes, emerging through the floors. Many of the buildings of the inner city of Christchurch were badly affected, but astoundingly the September quake had no fatalities. New



Figure 4. The collapsed Christ Church Cathedral. (Jacky Bowring)

Zealand's stringent building codes were heralded as a resounding success—together with the fact that at that hour of the day few people were out and about in the city.

After the September quake, heritage advocates and architects rallied against the demolition of buildings that were deemed dangerous by authorities. The battles mobilized the principles of heritage as core to identity, with passionate statements about the significance of the damaged buildings to the sense of place in Christchurch. By February an active program of lectures about postquake urban design in the city was underway, and there was a heightened consciousness about the significance of the role of the built environment in sustaining culture and identity. Nostalgia for the past was a motivating force, driving the will to protect the historic fabric. Even those who had taken their surroundings for granted began to express their concern for the city's built form and how it might be restored.

Then, everything changed. At 12:51 PM, in the middle of a working day, a 6.3 magni-



Figure 5. John Robert Godley's statue in pieces. (Gabriel Goh)

tude quake originating very close to the city center caused catastrophic damage. Recording the second highest ever ground shaking (topped only by the earthquake in Japan, which followed just a few weeks later), the nature of the movement was violent, exacerbated by the shallowness of the quake. This time there were many fatalities, with the death toll of 185. Profoundly symbolic was the collapse of Christ Church Cathedral. Standing right in the center of the city, the cathedral was an architectural icon, a definer of place. Its fall embodied the magnitude of what had happened (Fig. 4). Next to the cathedral, as though to underline the impact, the statue of the founder of the settlement of Christchurch, John Robert Godley, was shaken from its podium and lay in pieces on the ground. (Fig. 5)

The devastation of the city's built form was extensive. At the time of writing, over eight months after the February quake, the inner city remains under army guard, out of bounds to the public. Demolitions continue, with an estimated one thousand buildings in the inner city to be razed, over 80 percent of the city fabric will be gone. There is an

emphatic sense of alienation. Just as Twain's evocation of nineteenth-century Christchurch sounded like a faraway place, the city of today is a profoundly foreign country, to the extent that special passes are required to cross the border into the Red Zone. At night there is an eerie darkness. Where before there had been the bright lights of bars and restaurants, cinemas and nightclubs, there is now no light at all, not even street lights. It sits as a pool of blackness within a wider city that also remains broken and limping. Streets have been ruptured by liquefaction. Homes are temporarily repaired, their walls covered in plywood or black plastic sheeting. Many people have left the city, thousands are scattered across New Zealand and Australia.¹⁰ The devastation is much wider than the inner city, and the government will purchase and demolish seven thousand houses that are in suburban areas spread along the Avon River, amounting to some 350 hectares (nearly 900 acres) of quake damaged land. This in itself will have a major effect on Christchurch's sense of place.

Anxiety continues, with the city having experienced twelve thousand aftershocks to date, including a 6.3 and a 5.6 shake just an hour apart on June 13th, 2012, and shortly before the time of writing another 5.5 quake set back recovery efforts yet again. Major aftershocks such as this recent one are classified by authorities as "new events," meaning that new insurance claims can be lodged. And, even more significantly, with major new aftershocks the possibility of getting insurance for rebuilding is pushed even further into the future, delaying the city's recovery. The ongoing shaking continually compromises structures that have been braced in attempts to stabilize them.

In addition to the logistics of attempting to rebuild the city amid continued shaking, Christchurch's predicament has spurred heated debates over issues of heritage conservation and the future direction of urban character and form. Collapses and demolitions have created a dramatically different cityscape, and a range of conditions from the vast tabula rasa of razed sites, to rubble and ruins, and through to buildings that have been shored up by extensive bracing. Emotion runs high as the fate of ruins and damaged heritage buildings are debated. Economics and safety are in competition with memory and identity as priorities for scarce resources. And weaving in and out of the discussions on *what next* is the longing to return to *what was*, the nostalgic yearning for the benign city that was so familiar before the earthquakes began.

Six Nostalgias

The profound challenges facing Christchurch are fraught with emotion. The massive outpouring from the public expressed in the media and during the consultation phase for the Central City Plan¹¹ illustrates conflicting points of view regarding the role of the past in the present. The plan is being prepared by the Christchurch City Council as a recovery document for the city's rebuild, as required by the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority.¹² Struggling to comprehend the reality of what we are left with, some residents are calling for the preservation of as much as possible, while others promote the need to do basic repairs, decrying attention to the heritage fabric as mere sentimentality. Pushing and pulling across the emotional terrain are different nostalgias, different versions of the



Figure 6. The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament with the dome removed. Shipping containers are used to stabilize many of the heritage structures in the city. (Jacky Bowring)

backward gaze, and different courses of action as a result. The longing and desire that fuel nostalgia are melancholic impulses. Both nostalgia and melancholy are complex constellations of emotions, which can be simultaneously debilitating and necessary. They are debilitating in the inertia they can produce and the sense of negativity that can be associated with them; but they are also necessary in providing balance in the emotional repertoire, as part of what it is to be human.

Nostalgia attracts a multiplicity of definitions and critiques. For some nostalgia is merely benign reflection on the past, while for others it provides a vehicle for cynical profiteering on memories. Six perspectives on nostalgia are presented here, each of which is at play within Christchurch's postquake landscape, bringing a vast range of possible responses to the questions of preservation, conservation, and erasure.

1. "Nostalgia is amnesia turned around." Adrienne Rich¹³

Nostalgia is not always the result of voluntary memory, a conscious invocation of the past. Involuntary memory can also induce nostalgia, where reminiscences are prompted by triggers causing automatic recollection. Marcel Proust's madeleines in *The Remembrance of Things Past* are the seminal exemplar of involuntary memory, where childhood memories rush forward into Marcel's consciousness after the taste of the small cake dipped in tea. While Proust's memory trigger produces a discrete journey into the past, a landscape

filled with such prompts for remembering can produce cascades of memories.¹⁴ As Rich suggests, nostalgia can become the reverse of amnesia, where looking backward means the mind becomes completely flooded with memories.

Christchurch's broken buildings represent a constant presencing of the past, with sites such as the two ruined cathedrals posing demanding questions for the city's future. While Christ Church Cathedral is in the area still out of bounds, it is visible in the distance as the terminating point of an axial street. Where it had previously provided one of the "book ends" for this street—with the bluestone Gothic Revival Canterbury Museum at the other—it now perplexes those who view it. The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, known as one of the greatest cathedrals in the Southern Hemisphere, is very visible to the public, and is now out of the Red Zone. This cathedral, known as the Basilica, had been a high point for George Bernard Shaw during his visit to the city in 1934, when he remarked:

When I came to Christchurch, I suddenly saw a building and I said to the Mayor, "What is that?" I was told it was the Roman Catholic cathedral . . . When I saw that Roman Catholic cathedral of yours I suddenly thought of [Filippo] Brunelleschi . . . You have produced a New Zealand Brunelleschi. You have the classical style with a convenient arrangement.¹⁵

Its structure is now severely compromised and the dome recently removed to reduce the pressure on the vulnerable building (Fig. 6). These powerfully symbolic ruins, along with the many ruined "ordinary" buildings, are constantly visible as one moves through the city. Forgetting is not an option, and nostalgia as reverse-amnesia troubles the city. In her submission to the Draft Central City Plan, Member of Parliament (MP) Lianne Dalziel made a plea for this situation to be resolved. "I am totally opposed to a constant visual reminder of the earthquake through exposed ruins," Dalziel declared, adding that "I don't mind something people can go and see if they choose to, but this isn't ancient Rome."¹⁶ Dalziel's appeal was an attempt to avert one possible scenario for the city—as a ruin park. The constant presence of dark reminiscences would accompany such a park; relentless waves of involuntary memories would cause psychic unrest in the city. Dalziel explained, "I feel sick when I see buildings I love in ruins and it takes me back to two of the most frightening moments I hope to ever experience."

The power of ruins to trigger memories and avert amnesia is both a disturbing prospect and a basis for creative thinking about how to manage some of the responses to heritage. While the prospect of a city of ruins is daunting, the preservation of some ruins in their current state has been advocated as a "readymade" memorial. Debates over Christ Church Cathedral's fate often circle around its potential as a ruin-as-memorial, in the heart of the city. As part of my role as memory consultant for the Christchurch City Council, I toured the Red Zone looking for other ruins that might fulfill such a role. Sadly, the number of recognizable ruins is very few, and for the most part there is simply nothing. Amnesia is the likely prognosis for many sites, as the very object of loss is no longer present.



Figure 7. The CityViewAR phone application, showing one of the ghost-like models of demolished buildings which can be summoned into a view of the postdemolition landscape. (Jacky Bowring)

2. "Nostalgia is a sadness without an object." Susan Stewart¹⁷

The dislocation between remembering a place, a time, and its nonexistence is problematic for the future of Christchurch. For much of Christchurch the decisions about restoration have already been answered. What nature couldn't completely achieve, the demolition teams have, at the behest of risk-averse authorities. While residents, including MP Lianne Dalziel, voiced their concern over the prospect of inhabiting a city mired in ruin, the frank reality is that it is more likely that the city of the immediate future is one of vast empty lots, the De Chirican voids and isolated structures creating an uncanny unease.

Yet, nostalgia is something we yearn for. There is a wish to be able to contemplate the past, to remember, reflect, and re-enter that past time. One of the heritage interpretation tools recently launched aspires to offer some sense of familiarity within the now foreign cityscape. The augmented reality phone application, CityViewAR, was developed by Christchurch's University of Canterbury at their Human Interface Technology laboratory (HIT Lab). Launched as a free download at the end of October 2011, the application runs on smartphones, and a realtime view of the city through the phone's camera is augmented by a virtual reality image of what was there before. A number of buildings have been uploaded into the system, allowing for the surreal prospect of the ghost of a building now gone to be invoked on command (Fig. 7). The lost object is momentarily returned,

yet not tangible. Like the open wound of melancholy, re-seeing the demolished buildings constantly courts the lost object, not allowing for healing, not letting the wound close. Melancholy and nostalgia are the constant companions of a city struggling with loss and grief, and are essential elements of the emotional repertoire.

3. “Nostalgia may be the greatest barrier to imagining change . . .” Jamie Horwitz¹⁸

As much as nostalgia offers a vehicle for the emotions to tour the spaces of loss, it can also become a barrier. Like the paralysis of Benjamin’s “*linke Melancholie*,” or “Left Melancholy,” which encapsulated melancholy as a narcissistic self-obsession, nostalgia can become a narcotic. The political in-activism resulting from Left Melancholy was a “mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist.”¹⁹ Consumed by cultural pessimism, an existential crisis of sorts, a feeling of abandonment, left-leaning intellectuals during the “German Autumn” of 1977–81 entered a state of melancholy detachment, finding themselves unable to act.

As a barrier to change, nostalgia too can paralyze the populace. Edward Casey suggests that there is a “peculiar hauntingness” in nostalgia, and this can mean that we are so overwhelmed by remembering places that we “overlook the particular place we occupy in the present.”²⁰ This can suffocate the ability to move forward, as attention is turned only to those fragments of the past that might be retained, creating a sense of inertia. Despite the sense of urgency articulated by the risk-averse authorities, there were calls for time to think and consider the options. And in the context of limited financial resources there were even requests to nominate a top group of damaged heritage buildings which would merit saving from demolition—accepting that many would not make the cut and be demolished. As an indication of the economic magnitude of the situation for heritage buildings, the latest estimate for the repairs to Christ Church Cathedral is 50 million NZD, a daunting figure.²¹ Economic arguments are pitted against nostalgia, and the question of “what price heritage?” has been raised many times over the past few months. These debates take place during the ongoing aftershocks, and with each large shake nostalgia’s hold on the past diminishes a shade more.

The challenge is finding a balance between competing camps. Nostalgia as a barrier to change can be tempered by the single-minded concerns of the economic arguments. Innovation is called for. The exemplars from the past are invoked, with Coventry Cathedral in the UK, and Berlin’s Kaiser Wilhelm Church, cited as approaches which both preserve and create. Nostalgia cohabits with a forward-looking gaze on such sites, allowing for some of the ties that bind identity to remain while others are cut, allowing for history to continue unfolding into the future.

One intriguing prospect for Christ Church Cathedral is one which looks simultaneously backwards and forwards. Cathedral architect Sir Gilbert Scott had originally anticipated that it would be built in timber—like the nearby church of St. Michael of All Angels that dates from 1872 and is now the only usable church in the central city thanks to its timber construction. However, after finding that building stone was in ready supply in



Figure 8. Before: The Sydenham Wesleyan Church (Jacky Bowring)

Canterbury, Scott drew up plans for a stone cathedral, and it was completed around 1888. As the future of the cathedral hangs in the balance, the prospect of recreating the building according to the original drawings, in timber, offers the opportunity to be both nostalgic for a return to the idea of the church's central place in the city, as well as future proofing it against seismic issues through using timber technology which is recognized as a high performing material.

4. "Nostalgia seemed like a waste of time and an unaffordable luxury . . ." Svetlana Boym²²

In the period immediately after the February earthquake, nostalgia receded momentarily from the collective concern of the city. Faced with dozens of deaths and injuries, and shattered infrastructure, any prospects of fond remembrances were far from the minds of most Christchurch residents. The prospect of nostalgia during these months was, as Boym describes in her perspective as a new immigrant to the United States, a waste of time and



Figure 9. After: The Sydenham Wesleyan Church (Jacky Bowring)

a luxury beyond what was possible. However, it was during this time—when nostalgia was off duty—that so much of the heritage fabric of the city was demolished. Minister for Earthquake Recovery Gerry Brownlee encapsulated the perspective of nostalgia as a luxury with his declaration soon after the February quake that all the “old dungs”²³ should be knocked down. Brownlee announced that, “[o]ld stuff, if it’s got any damage at all, needs to be got down and got out, because it’s dangerous and we don’t need it.”²⁴ Although people died in heritage buildings that had been saved after the September quake, most of the deaths occurred in more modern buildings, particularly two built in the 1960s. Even so, the quake’s costs—both in human lives and financial terms—weighed heavily against the heritage buildings, and nostalgia was considered too much of a luxury in the face of the grave situation.

Yet, while nostalgia can be an extravagance, or even a suffocating or paralyzing influence, it can also act as a protector. Without the claims on the past that nostalgia invokes,

the value of the remaining objects can go unrecognized. One poignant example of the loss at this time is the Sydenham Wesleyan Church (Fig. 8). Previously providing a symmetrical balance to the Sydenham Post Office, the bluestone Gothic Revival church marked the entry into a distinctive area of Colombo Street. Amid the chaos of the postquake period, the church was demolished due to safety concerns, without consultation with the owners or discussions of how it might be stabilized in the short term in order to address longer term prospects for restoration. The ruined heap of the church is on one of the busiest thoroughfares in the city, Brougham Street, and persists as a lament, a cipher for the broader losses in the city (Fig. 9).

5. "Nostalgia is denial—denial of the painful present." Woody Allen²⁵

The claim of nostalgia as a form of denial, made by Paul in Allen's film *Midnight in Paris* (2011), is akin to ideas of Golden Age thinking as a belief that past eras were superior to that in which one is currently living. This resonates with the psychoanalytical situation where "nostalgic reminiscing may act as a . . . substitute for the process of mourning, which such reminiscing impedes by reviving and maintaining lost presences rather than giving these presences up and gaining independence of them."²⁶ I found myself sometimes imagining—wishing—that what was happening in the city was merely an elaborate piece of performance art. Somewhere behind the art installation of the wreckage was the familiar city, ready to be revealed again. The kind of thing that might happen in a Woody Allen film, where there is an alternative reality one can travel into, but later return to the real world.²⁷

For Christchurch, pain and mourning are ever-present, and while the debates ensue over the quandaries facing damaged buildings, an alternative discourse provides an escape. The representation of the quake city has become an important outlet for grief. Numerous books of quake photographs, a story for children about a cat's experience of the shakes, and a film about the events serve as forms of escapism. While it seems paradoxical that people would seek to be reminded of the traumatic time of the quake itself, the intensity of the emotions at that time represent a powerful collective force. Since the period immediately after the February quake there has been a slow descent into harsh and heated arguments, and the feelings of community and collectiveness are beginning to dissolve. The memories of that period of closeness, the pride in our resilience, the national and international rescue workers that came to our aid, and the deification of heroes, provide a magnet for nostalgia for the event.

As well as looking back nostalgically to the sense of community spirit and strength, the books and other materials also look further back to the untrammelled city of the past. Books including Peter Morath's *Christchurch: A Nostalgic Tribute*,²⁸ Bruce Ansley's *Christchurch Heritage*,²⁹ as well as 2012 calendars featuring views of the past, provide a salve of sorts (Fig. 10). These books offer the prospect of time travel, a journey back to that faraway place from the past, a sojourn from the jarringly foreign country that the city has become.



Figure 10. Nostalgic publications are prominent in the city's top 10 most popular books at present. (Jacky Bowring)

6. Nostalgia: “Memories for sale”³⁰

At the same time as representations of the past provide an escape from the present, even a denial of the excoriating environment of the contemporary city, they are also commodifications of the disaster. Cynically, nostalgia can be seen as the fuel for the memory industry, where products take our own pasts and sell them back to us. In defense of works such as Ansley’s and Morath’s, it is important to note that a large percentage of sales are donated to funds that support the city’s recovery. Even so, it is quickly apparent how collective memory becomes something to be re-sold, where the symbols of the buildings at risk—Christ Church Cathedral’s rose window and the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament’s dome—become remembered in miniature as pieces of jewelry, microscopic versions of a city that no longer exists.

Not only in books and jewelry, the commodification of nostalgia is problematic for the built form of the city itself. Will the rebuilding of the city replicate the distinctive pattern of verandas and lanes that characterized our colonial legacy? Will there be a cynical architecture that attempts to sell our past back to us? The rebuild can feed upon the fruits of the collective memory, and pander to the nostalgic yearning for the past, with the potential problem that a superficial veneer of the past becomes synonymous with the past itself. Just as multinational companies appropriate the nuances of the local for commercial purposes, suggesting they “‘respect’ the values and cultures of the local population by

adapting its various goods to suit those vernacular languages and practices,”³¹ so too can the economic interests of the present latch on to the elements of the past that hold romantic appeal. In New Zealand one of multinational hamburger chain McDonald’s offerings was a “Kiwiburger”: a deft commercial move that condescended to a region’s desire for identity, and was doubtlessly echoed in every other country in which they sell burgers. Frederic Jameson explains that what happens is “corporations are inserted into the very heart of local and regional culture, about which it becomes difficult to decide whether it is authentic any longer (and indeed whether that term still means anything).”³²

The cynicism of faking a connection with regional identity is a concern for the design professions. As Richard Weller observes, “[l]andscape architecture has, as everyone knows, tapped into a profitable trade in feigning intimacy with local contexts. Sometimes this business of symbolising place might encapsulate the pride and resilience of local identity, but more often than not it smacks of insecurity, ideology and asphyxiated imagination.”³³ This feigned intimacy with the local can easily slip into a feigned familiarity with Christchurch’s past. The dilemmas over the remnant structures and the razed sites are troubled by the prospect of the replication of the past as a stage set, a Wild West city of façades and fake history. This concern underpins the careful considerations by ICOMOS in terms of façadism. While in the past the organization has taken a harsh view of even the possibility of retaining only the façade of a building, recent revisions to the New Zealand ICOMOS Charter—ironically and coincidentally made on the date of Christchurch’s first earthquake—recognize the potential for a respectful incorporation of a heritage building’s outer wall into a new building. As in many cities, Christchurch has poor examples of the façadism carried out in the 1990s, where a diminutive historic façade was dwarfed by an unsympathetic tower block inserted behind. For this city it is significant that even the smallest remnant of the past now has increased value in the face of so many losses. Negotiating the prospect of a cynical interpretation of nostalgia, as well as avoiding the unsympathetic treatment of the remains, is one of the keys to a meaningful future for Christchurch’s built form.

Conclusion: The Faraway Realm of Nostalgia

Far from a simple reflection on a past idyll, nostalgia’s place in contemporary culture agitates arguments for how traces of the past are handled. The decisions made over preservation, conservation, or erasure are amplified at times of crisis, where choices become not simply philosophical ones motivated by positions on authenticity, but must be made in the context of safety and economics. Simone Weil wrote that “A collectivity has its roots in the past,” and that “[w]e possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us.”³⁴ Our shared nostalgia might therefore secure the remains of the past for the future. Yet, the competing nostalgias, the divergent views on the past, threaten the fabric of the city.

In November 2011, nearly 9 months after the February quake, CERA has started bus trips into the city center for residents. This journey into the foreign place that was once the city’s heart is prefaced by warnings about what people will face, and several opportuni-

ties for them to disembark before crossing the border. Once underway, the bus carries Red Cross staff, and is followed by a car in case one of the passengers needs to escape from the experience of being in the ruined city. Other than in such an emergency, no one is permitted to leave the bus, as the streets remain so dangerous. Residents had strongly vocalized their desire to see the remains of their city, and the ability to enter the Red Zone had been a point of great contention as visiting celebrities were taken on tours while locals were kept out.

The return to the city will mean a confrontation between a nostalgia that has developed in isolation, and the frank reality of the city's new form. In my own visits into the Red Zone as memory consultant, my nostalgic recollections of the former city were quickly erased in the face of stark reality. Streets that had been enlivened by the patina of daily life were now clinically, jarringly clean. As well as the extensive demolitions that are ongoing, the need to recover forensic evidence for the identification of bodies had meant an extremely thorough sweeping and gathering process had been underway. The streets were cleaner than they had ever been, and that De Chirico otherworldliness permeated every vista. As Kant cautioned, the homecoming is unlikely to be a cure for homesickness, as it inevitably brings disappointment.³⁵ The eerie silence, the cleanliness, and the absence of the familiar were accompanied by an uneasy grappling with the changed scale of the city. On one hand the city seemed vast beyond comprehension—Harries's "sliding out into space"—and on the other hand the sites of buildings I remembered no longer seemed big enough to have ever accommodated them. As with the disjunction between the memories of childhood and the "real" scale of things in adult life, there was a mismatch between recollection and reality, the nostalgic experience of "things appearing diminished in stature."³⁶

Christ Church Cathedral remains the symbolic core of the unfolding narrative. The Church is asserting its rights as owners of the building and land, and has independently made its own decision to go through with a partial demolition. Heritage advocates and engineers have identified this as the least favorable option, and the wider collective has expressed its dismay at the disregard for the building that is so central to the city—"as important as the Eiffel Tower is to Paris."³⁷ The quandaries of nostalgia are tangled up in the cathedral, with the questions of whose memories, whose heritage, whose right to demolish, circling the site. The many nostalgias are mired in the objective reality of bureaucracy, economics, and insurance claims. The subjective, imaginative, contemplative realm of nostalgia is rapidly becoming a faraway destination.

References

1. Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 248. The phrase the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is Latin for "fearful and fascinating mystery," and is used by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* to name the awesome mystery common to all forms of religious experience.
2. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin," *Oppositions*, 25 (Fall 1982): 21–51, especially 32.

3. William Gilpin in David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 175.
4. Jean Starobinski, "Melancholy Among the Ruins," in *The Invention of Liberty, 1700–1789*. (Cleveland: Sikra, 1964), 180.
5. Florence M. Hetzler, "Ruin Time and Ruins" *Leonardo* 21, no. 1 (1988): 51–55, especially 51.
6. Rose Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 454.
7. Mark Twain, *Beyond the Equator* (Stilwell, Kans.: Digireads.com, 2008), 134–35.
8. David Lowenthal's book title referred to the opening lines of L. P. Hartley's *The Go Between*, which began, "The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there." Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, xvi.
9. David Williams, "Explaining the Science Behind the Earthquakes," *The Press*, July 28, 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/5350527/Explaining-the-science-behind-quakes> (accessed September 28, 2012).
10. Christchurch's population prior to the earthquakes was around 375,000, and it is still not certain what impact the events have had on population numbers. In terms of migration to Australia, the Government Statistician advised that "Since the earthquake on 22 February, the city has experienced 1,300 more departures and 400 fewer arrivals than in the same period of 2010." "Kiwi Migration to Australia Hits Record After Christchurch Earthquake," *News.com.au*, June 21, 2011, <http://www.news.com.au/world/kiwi-migration-to-australia-hits-record/story-e6frfkyi-1226079403310> (accessed September 28, 2012). A current estimate is that around 8,900 have left the city.
11. The Central City Plan was informed by a massive public consultation program called Share an Idea, which was run via an expo and website. Share an Idea amassed a remarkable response, with 106,000 ideas being contributed.
12. The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (known as CERA, and pronounced "Sarah") was established by central government after the February earthquake. CERA was vested with extraordinary powers in terms of the compulsory acquisition of sites, managing the process of demolition, and guiding the rebuild.
13. Adrienne Rich, from "Turning the Wheel" in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, Poems 1978–1981* (New York and London: Norton, 1993), 59. This stanza from Rich's poem is cited in several works, including Edward S. Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," *Man and World* 20, no. 4 (October 1987): 361.
14. Marcel Proust, "Swann's Way," in *The Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1 (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2002), 39.
15. Bruce Ansley, "Petre's Masterpiece," *The Press*, October 22, 2011, downloaded from <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/lifestyle/your-christchurch/5833589/Petres-masterpiece>.
16. Paul Gorman, "One Quake Memorial Enough—MP," *The Press*, October 4, 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/5726708/One-quake-memorial-enough-MP> (accessed September 28, 2012).
17. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.
18. Jamie Horowitz, "Leaky Walls: Challenges to Sustainable Practice in Post-Disaster Communities," in *Sustainable Architectures: Cultures and Natures in Europe and North America*, ed. Simon Guy and Steven A. Moore (New York: Spon Press, 2005), 196.
19. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19–27, especially 22.
20. Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 201.
21. Fifty million NZD is around 40.5 million USD.
22. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books), xv.
23. "Dunger" is a colloquial New Zealand term for a wreck—usually a decrepit car or machine.
24. Kate Chapman, "Lives Before Christchurch Earthquake Damaged Buildings," *The Press*, March 1, 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-earthquake/4715003/Lives-before-Christchurch-earthquake-damaged-historic-buildings> (accessed September 28, 2012).
25. The remark is made by the character Paul in Allen's most recent film, *Midnight in Paris* (2011).

26. Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," 376.
27. As in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) where the character Tom exits the film he is in and walks into reality, and subsequently returns to the film taking Cecilia from the real world with him. In Allen's recent film, *Midnight in Paris* (2011) Gil is transported back to 1920s Paris—a time that he sees as an ideal age—when he is picked up on the stroke of midnight by a vintage car.
28. Peter Morath, *Christchurch: A Nostalgic Tribute* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 2011).
29. Bruce Ansley, *Christchurch Heritage* (Auckland: Random House, 2011).
30. Greg Dickinson, "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 1 (1997): 1–27.
31. Frederic Jameson, "Is Space Political?" in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 255.
32. Ibid.
33. Richard Weller, "Between Hermeneutics and Datascares: A Critical Appreciation of Emergent Landscape Design Theory and Praxis through the Writings of James Corner 1990–2000 (Part One)," *Landscape Review* 7, no. 1 (2000): 12.
34. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 44.
35. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, I, secs. 31 and 32, cited in Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," 367.
36. Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," 370.
37. Art Historian and chair of the heritage campaign group Iconic, Dr. Ian Lochhead, in Charlie Gates, "Cera gives Christ Church Cathedral Ultimatum," *The Press*, November 4, 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/5906245/Cera-gives-Christ-Church-Cathedral-ultimatum> (accessed September 28, 2012).